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# The Incline Bench Dumbbell Row Exercise

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## EXERCISE TYPE

The incline bench dumbbell row (IBDBR) is a compound, multiple joint, upper body strength and conditioning exercise. It is intended to increase shoulder girdle stability and strength and endurance of muscles within the upper and middle back, posterior (rear) shoulder girdle, trunk, and anterior (front) of the elbow joint (1,2).

## BENEFITS OF THE EXERCISE

The IBDBR exercise can be performed by clients of all ages and abilities to improve posture, shoulder stability, and upper body pulling strength (1–5).

## INTRODUCTION

The IBDBR (also referred to as a lying dumbbell bench row) is relatively simple to perform and can be safely and appropriately challenging for a broad spectrum of clients. Because of the strict nature of the exercise, proper teaching, posture, and execution are essential. The incline bench can provide additional external support to the spine and is henceforth an appropriate substitute for or a supplement to other rowing exercises like barbell, single-arm dumbbell, and seated cable rows. Clients can use an adjustable weight training bench to perform this exercise.

The purpose of this *Do It Right* column is to provide instructions for performing the IBDBR exercise. The IBDBR exercise appears in Figure 1.

## PRIMARY MUSCLES ACTIVATED

The latissimus dorsi, teres major, rhomboids, middle trapezius, lower trapezius, posterior deltoid, infraspinatus and teres minor, biceps brachi, brachialis, and brachioradialis are primarily active; however, neck muscles like the longus coli, longus capitis, sternocleidomastoid, upper trapezius and levator scapulae provide stability to the cervical spine (neck region) during the incline bench dumbbell row (1–4,6). Figure 2 depicts an anterior and posterior view of primary upper body muscles activated during the incline bench dumbbell row exercise.

## TEACHING AND SAFETY POINTS

The IBDBR is a two-phase exercise consisting of the upward pulling and downward lowering phases. The pulling and lowering phases are preceded and followed by the starting and ending positions in which, the dumbbells in each hand are pulled up to the rib cage and then lowered toward the floor, respectively, in a controlled manner. In order to enhance safety and to reinforce proper exercise technique and body position, clients should initially use light dumbbells they can easily lift. Clients should be observed and instructed from the front, back, and side while performing the IBDBR exercise. Clients should be screened for and free of musculoskeletal injuries (like neck, back, and shoulder injuries) prior to performing this exercise. Clients should demonstrate proper technique and control prior to increasing the weight of the dumbbells. It is appropriate in some cases to teach

**Figure 1.** The incline bench dumbbell row exercise. All photos in this column are courtesy of Peter Ronai, M.S., FACSM.

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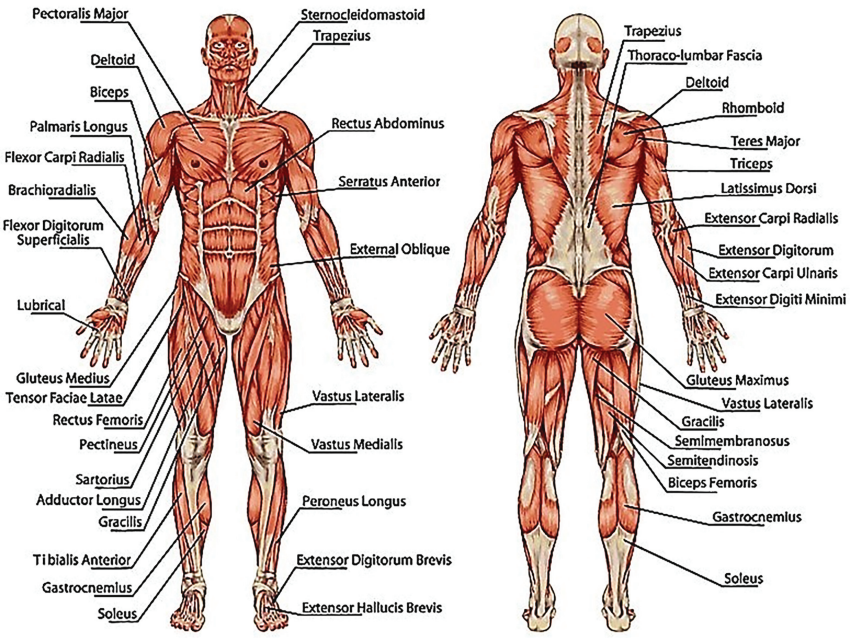
**Figure 2.** Anterior and posterior muscles activated during the incline bench dumbbell row.




novices the proper alignment on the bench and movement sequences without any weights before using dumbbells.

## PROPER ALIGNMENT

While lying prone (face down) at approximately a 45-degree angle, a level, head-to-ankle alignment is maintained on an adjustable, padded training bench. The head and neck are held in a comfortable, neutral position with the upper chest resting lightly on or just off the edge of the padded bench. Proper alignment is maintained by tucking the chin in gently, bending the knees slightly, and flexing (bending) the ankles so the weight of the feet against the ground is on the toes. Prior to starting the upward pulling phase of the exercise, the dumbbells which initially rest on the ground must be actively raised into the starting position by active scapular retraction or adduction. The dumbbells are gripped with a shoulder width, neutral (palms parallel and facing each other) handgrip while hanging motionless beneath the chest, perpendicular with and just above the ground. Elbows are fully extended. All repetitions begin and end in this position. As a teaching alternative, a PVC pipe placed along the head, neck, and spine can help novices maintain proper alignment when they are learning how to do the IBDBR. This teaching technique can be applied to most rowing exercises. Figure 3 depicts proper body alignment in the prone position on an incline training bench.

## UPWARD PULLING PHASE

The head, neck, and trunk remain rigid and motionless throughout the exercise with all movement occurring within the scapulothoracic (between shoulder blades and upper back) spine region, glenohumeral (shoulder), and elbow joints. The chest is pressed outward slightly into the padded bench, with the scapulae (shoulder blades) slightly retracted or adducted (pulled toward each other) while the arms remain parallel with the ribcage and trunk throughout each repetition. Exhale while pulling the dumbbells upward in a smooth, continuous manner. The upward pull is accomplished by concentric actions of the latissimus dorsi, teres major, rhomboids, middle trapezius, lower trapezius, posterior deltoid, infraspinatus and teres minor, biceps brachi, brachialis, and brachioradialis muscles (1,2,6).

**Figure 3.** Proper body alignment during the incline bench dumbbell row exercise.

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**TABLE: Common Mistakes and Corrective Verbal Cues**

| Common Error | Verbal Cue |
|---|---|
| Raising the chest and torso off the bench or rounding the upper back | "Push chest outward and keep it against the bench" |
| Not pulling dumbbells up fully | "Pull dumbbells up to the ribcage while pointing elbows toward the ceiling" |
| Jerking the dumbbells with momentum | "Pull with your upper back not your body" |
| Flaring the elbows outward | "Keep arms parallel to each other when pulling" |
| Raising/lowering head and neck above/below neutral position | "Keep chest on bench, ears over the shoulders and chin tucked" |
| Pulling the hands too far behind the ribcage (increasing anterior shoulder joint stress) | "Just pull arms and elbows up parallel with the back of the rib cage or trunk" |
| Initiating the pull with the arms not the upper back muscles | "Push chest out and shoulder blades (scapulae) together while pulling elbows upward toward the ceiling" |
| Breath holding | "Exhale when pulling up; inhale when lowering" |
| Not extending elbows fully between repetitions | "Straighten the elbows at the bottom" |

The mechanical advantage occurs during the first half of and dissipates throughout the last half of the IBDBR (7,8). Repetitions are more difficult to complete than they are to initiate so emphasis should be placed on pulling forcefully through the full range of movement during each repetition. Pause approximately 1 second before lowering the dumbbells to the starting position. A duration of 1 to 2 seconds during the upward pulling phase is appropriate. The Table contains a list of common mistakes and corrective verbal cues.

Figure 4a and 4b depict the starting and pausing positions during the upward pulling phase of the incline bench dumbbell row. Please refer to video 1, http://links.lww.com/FIT/A367, and video 2, http://links.lww.com/FIT/A368, for visuals depicting proper technique for performing the incline bench dumbbell row exercise.

## THE DOWNWARD LOWERING PHASE

While the head, neck, torso, and feet maintain the same alignment as during the upward pulling phase, the dumbbells are lowered and returned to the starting position in a controlled manner. The downward or lowering phase is accomplished by eccentric actions of the latissimus dorsi, teres major, rhomboids, middle trapezius, lower trapezius, posterior deltoid, infraspinatus and teres minor, erector spinae, biceps brachi, brachialis, and brachioradialis muscles (1,2,6). Verbal teaching cues include "keep the trunk motionless and arms close to the body," "lower the dumbbells with control, don't drop them," and "straighten the elbows fully." Figure 5 depicts the end of the lowering phase of the IBDBR exercise.

Loading intensities expressed as percentage of the one repetition maximum (1-RM), number of repetitions, and sets as well as rest period durations should reflect the specific objectives of the overall training program, which can include hypertrophy, strength, endurance, or power (2,9).

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

As a teaching alternative, a small "squeeze" ball held between the underside of the chin and sternum (breastbone) can help novices maintain proper alignment when they are learning how to do the IBDBR.

## SUMMARY

The IBDBR exercise is one of a number of rowing exercises utilized to build strength and muscle development in the upper back, posterior shoulder girdle, and shoulder joint muscles, respectively, and improve skill performance in sports requiring upper body pulling strength. It can be taught to clients during the beginner, intermediate, and advanced stages of training.

**Figure 4.** A, Starting position of the upward pulling phase of the incline bench dumbbell row. B, The pause position during the upward pulling phase of the incline bench dumbbell row.

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**Figure 5.** The end of the lowering phase of the incline bench dumbbell row exercise.

Its utility as a safe and effective strength development tool is predicated on sound instruction, effective supervision, and proper execution.


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